

VOICES

January 10, 1988, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Psalm 29

Mark 1:9-11

1 Samuel 3:1-10

"The voice of the Lord is upon the waters."

-Psalm 29:3a (RSV)

Joseph Sittler died two weeks ago. His memorial service is this afternoon. I have not been invited to speak at the service and I have some things to say, so I will say them now. His passing is an important event in the religious community... As I thought about wanting to say some things about Sittler and the text - the two kept converging. If that sounds like an excess of homiletical acrobatics, let me assure you that it was Professor Sittler who helped me, and many, many others, to understand and to somehow appreciate and appropriate the meaning of Bible stories, like Samuel and Eli in the temple. Stories which are both charming but also profoundly disturbing.

Sittler was a Professor of Theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago and when he retired from that faculty, signed on at the Lutheran School of Theology in Hyde Park. He is not as widely known as he should be, primarily because he spent most of his life teaching students how to think theologically, instead of writing books. He did write some; he lectured, preached and taught all over the world. In the universe of theology and theological education, he was a giant and he brought distinction to the University and the City.

He changed my life and may be as responsible as anyone for my vocational decision. Simply put: I came to Chicago as a theological seeker with many more questions than answers. And my first class was with a Professor who suggested that God is in the questions, the search, the pursuit of truth, beauty, meaning; that one needed to be suspicious not only of simple answers to difficult questions, (which I already was, having been frustrated by the very sure but facile answers of evangelical fundamentalism) but suspicious of over-simplicity in any form; and suspicious of that tendency in ourselves to reduce everything to manageable portions.

I never heard that before. I thought being religious meant having answers and having personal experiences which confirmed the answers. "Are

you saved? Do you know the Lord?" A person of real faith, I thought, should not only be able to say yes - but to name the time and place and to have felt it deeply.

I hadn't heard of Sittler either. In fact, all I knew about the University of Chicago was that Amos Alonzo Stagg had coached football, a Chicago halfback was the first Heisman Trophy winner and the atomic bomb was invented underneath the bleachers. I was told that it was a good place to study theology without having to jump through any vocational or ecclesiastical hoops or even, for that matter, having to believe in God. And then I met Joseph Sittler.

You see where I was, spiritually and intellectually, was where I have subsequently discovered many, if not most of us are. Namely we are interested in religion, but convinced that whatever it is, other people have it. We are interested in the question of God - meaning, value, purpose, hope - but aware that our own experience of God is pretty thin. Other people seem quite sure of their experiences and more than willing to witness or "share" those experiences in a way that always makes us feel spiritually anemic. In short, we haven't heard a voice in the night calling our name; and so we remain suspended between a kind of wistful longing for the reality of God and a nagging suspicion that the whole business is simply our human need for something beyond ourselves.

Professor Sittler got my attention by saying that tendency to want to confirm the truth of Christianity with our feelings - was itself an error. "It tempts us," he said, "to hang the reality of God, the compass of his demands, the scope of Biblical and theological meaning upon a febrile nail: the warmth and immediacy of a feeling of blessed assurance." [Grace Notes and Other Fragments, p. 48]

So maybe there is Christian truth which does not depend on my emotions to confirm it. Maybe there is even a divine call to faithfulness, discipleship - which doesn't quite come across in full stereophonic precision, with the voice of God sounding like Charlton Heston on Mt. Sinai.

Sittler said -

"I have not seen any burning bushes. John Wesley's 'strangely warmed' heart at Aldersgate Street - this is not my street. I have not the possibility to say of the Christian faith what many honest persons have said about it. But I have come to see that to declare as a gift of God that which I do not fully possess is, nevertheless, a duty of obedience."

Sittler was also an artist with language. He knew by heart and used the great poets of the English language and he constructed sentences which still leave me breathless. When he preached here in September of 1985, at the age of eighty, nearly blind, he walked into the pulpit, told a joke - so that the laughter of the congregation would tell him where we were. He then faced us, put a finger beside his nose and it was glorious, the theological equivalent of watching Michael Jordan soar or Solti conduct. Sittler understood the power of the Word.

Listen to this - as an amplification of the point that religious truth is bigger than our emotional response to it:

"Is the opulence of the grace of God to be measured by my inventory? Is the great catholic faith of nineteen centuries to be reduced to my interior dimensions? Are the arching lines of the gracious possible to be pulled down to the little spurts of my personal compass? Is the great heart of the reality of God to speak in only the broken accent that I can follow after? No. That ought not to be. Therefore, one is proper and right to sometimes talk of things one doesn't know all about. In obedience to the bigness of the story which transcends personal apprehension, one may do this." [Ibid. p. 50-51] ...which is exactly what you and I need to hear as we think about a Bible story which is both charming and profoundly disturbing.

It is disturbing because most of us have not heard anything remotely like a voice in the middle of the night telling us what to do with the rest of our lives. And because we have not, we are tempted to "blow off" the whole story as an empty myth, or an experience which more religious types have but not us.

But first the charm. This is a great story. And a human story if you listen to it carefully. It is about 3,000 years old. An elderly couple, Elkanah and Hannah, to their great surprise discover that they are going to have a baby. They are so happy they promise they will give their baby to God.

So when the child, Samuel, is twelve, Hannah and Elkanah make good on their promise and take him to an old priest, Eli, who presides over a sanctuary - or sacred shrine at Shiloh. They give Samuel to Eli, and it is there and then that Samuel hears the voice.

The voice comes at night. Samuel and Eli are sleeping. Samuel thinks it is Eli calling. He wakes Eli and asks what he wants. Eli thinks Samuel is dreaming and sends him back to bed. It happens several times. What I love most about the story is that three times Samuel mistakes the voice for Eli. It doesn't sound like God - it sounds like the old priest. And Eli does exactly what you and I would do under the circumstances. He sends Samuel back to bed. It's fairly standard procedure, I should think, that if a child is standing beside your bed at two a.m., shaking you awake to tell you he's heard a voice, you assure him that there is no voice, everything is okay, pat him, hug him, send him for a drink and then back to bed so everyone can get some sleep. And if it keeps happening all night long - his shaking you awake and insisting: "But I do hear it - I keep hearing the voice," you and I would do exactly what old Eli did. Turning over and pulling the covers up over his head... "All right - all right! You heard a voice... Next time you hear it, stay there, see what happens next - listen. Tell me about it in the morning."

Whatever happened that night, out of it came Israel's first prophet: the man who would embody the soul of the people, who would help them choose their first King when the time came, who would anoint Saul as King and would shape history - all of history.

It's a great, charming story. But it is a disturbing story too - because we haven't heard a voice like that, and the life of faith would be a lot simpler if we did. Having faith would be so much easier if our own "internal dimensions" were a little more ample... or so we think.

One of the oldest and most intriguing ideas in the Bible is that if you listen to the world, you will hear the voice of God. The Times travel section last week carried a delightful little essay, "To Seacoasts, With Love." I find articles with titles like that peculiarly irresistible in January. The writer told how he loves nothing so much as a walk on the beach in the middle of a storm. And I recalled that long ago I began the practice, always, without exception, of walking out to the ocean - when we are there in the summer - early, preferably before the sun comes up, to look and to listen. And then several summers ago - sitting down on the deck looking and listening and reading - I discovered Psalm 29, and the reason I always do that: "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters."

"Listen," Eli told Samuel, and I suggest that when we listen, what we hear is the voice of the Lord. Now there is an old and venerable and continuing debate among theologians about how much of God you can know by listening to the world.

"All you need," say some, known as Pantheists. God is in the world. The world is in God. God is the world. The world is God. Others say... "nothing of God is known through nature. Nature is neutral, often cruel, beautiful by accident."

What the Bible seems to say is that "The heavens are telling the glory of God... The voice of the Lord is upon the waters."

It isn't the whole story. God speaks through people and events in history and supremely in the life of a man named Jesus. But for those who can hear - the voice of God is also heard in the world. And it might be a good starting point for those of us who have not yet heard voices.

"Listen" Eli said, and for us even that is no easy assignment. We assume, for instance, that when it comes to religion, we ought to keep talking. Remember... We think religion means having answers, not asking questions. So logically, praying means talking. Being quiet and listening is sometimes excruciatingly painful. Presbyterians find a Quaker meeting uncomfortable. Thirty seconds of complete silence in a worship service will make us squirm. But there is a whole tradition of spirituality which teaches that "listening" is a spiritual discipline at least as important as speaking; that prayer is the act of first discerning the presence of God, listening to God's voice, of remaining silent before God.

"Listen," Eli advised Samuel. It is a discipline. It is a ministry, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: the ministry of listening to each other. Theological seminarians invest a lot of academic effort in courses designed to teach potential clergy the creative potential of the four words - "Shut up and listen." Physicians keep telling us that the greatest single demand and the most difficult for them to meet, is the need of people for someone to listen to them.

So - to those who have not heard a voice, or had a personal experience with the reality and immediacy of God, the first word is "try listening. Stop talking for a while and listen... Listen to the world - listen to other people." And the second word here is that the voice of God may not always be precise, or what we are listening for. The ancient story, after all, is very clear. God is speaking to Samuel, but Samuel doesn't recognize it as God's voice.

That is very good news. Joseph Sittler helped me by teaching me that the experiences don't happen with the same clarity and precision and intensity for everyone. It's not that other people don't have them: it's just that they don't happen with the same intensity - or we all don't experience them the same. I think we need to hear that. Because I think we have become convinced that if our religious experience isn't emotionally shattering and documentable - we haven't had one. I think we have accepted the definition of conversion as a radical, one time, profound upheaval... If you haven't felt it deeply, dramatically - if you haven't heard it clearly - if you haven't heard a voice calling your name - it isn't real. Well, things are a lot clearer in retrospect, I have discovered in my own life. And Sittler helped me see that it is that way for most of us: that when Moses saw a burning bush in the desert, he was probably scared and probably looked around for a bucket of water to put it out. The theological content was not altogether clear at the moment.

John Mulder, President of Louisville Seminary, son of this congregation, said in a convocation address after moving to Louisville from Princeton: "The experience was frustrating but it revealed to me again the curious and wonderful mystery of how God calls us. It is a rare call that resounds with clarion simplicity."

That has been my experience and I believe it is the experience of most of us. God's voice is not demanding, loud, harsh, precise; but soft, easily missed, often sounding unclear at the time. We are free not to hear it, to ignore it, or to disregard it.

The basic assertion of the Christian faith is that God has spoken most clearly in Jesus Christ. God's voice is heard in the life of that man: in his words, but also his deeds - his teaching, his healing, his loving and forgiving. God's Word became flesh in him. The word we hear in the world and in the voices of other people - that word became flesh in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's voice, we believe and on occasion experience, is an assurance - a reminder that we are not alone. And sometimes it is judgment; sometimes it is a voice of angry impatience; and sometimes, always, in fact, it is a bidding, an invitation to trust, to commit, to follow.

That voice will not demand. It will not intrude. It will be persistent because God will never give up on you, but it will not violate your freedom to ignore it. And, you will have to listen - carefully - in order to hear.

So, I invite you to do that. Listen for God's voice. If you have never heard it - listen. It may never come with the precision you wish or expect or hope for... no matter - listen.

In G. B. Shaw's play based on the life of Joan of Arc, there is a wonderful exchange between Joan, the Archbishop and King Charles. It's near the end and Joan, as you know, will die, a martyr.

The Archbishop asks - "How do you know you are right?"

Joan answers - "I always know - my voices."

King Charles interrupts her - "Oh, your voices, your voices. Why don't the voices come to me? I am king, not you."

Joan responds: "They do come to you but you do not hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the Angelus rings you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed from the heart and listened to the thrilling of the bells in the air after they have stopped ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do." Well... maybe -

"The voice of the Lord is upon the waters," the Psalmist promised...

And old Eli - to Samuel - and to us... "If the voice calls you - listen - say, 'speak Lord, for thy servant hears.'" Amen.

O Lord, - silence in us any voice but your own, that hearing, we may know your love and your will for us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.